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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (WLAWRENCE), D (JOST), DRL, NEA/PI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/24/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KMPI](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: DEPUTY SECRETARY'S ROUND TABLE WITH TUNISIAN CIVIL
SOCIETY

REF: A. TUNIS 388

[1](#)B. 04/03/06 ERELI STATEMENT
[1](#)C. TUNIS 501
[1](#)D. TUNIS 1204

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson for Reasons 1.4 b and d

[1](#)1. (U) MAY 18, 2006; 2:15 P.M.; TUNIS, TUNISIA.

[1](#)2. (C) Participants:

U.S.

The Deputy Secretary
Ambassador William Hudson
Christine Davies, D Special Assistant
Aaron Jost, D Special Assistant
Michael Matera, D Executive Assistant
Richard Mills, D Senior Advisor
Brennan Gilmore, Human Rights Officer (notetaker)
Faouzi Chaouch (Interpreter)

TUNISIA

Mokhtar Trifi, Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) President
Taieb Baccouche, Arab Institute for Human Rights President
Lotfi Hajji, Tunisian Journalists' Syndicate President and
al-Jazeera correspondent
Mohsen Marzouk, Freedom House North African Representative
Rachid Khachana, opposition newspaper al-Mawqif
Editor-in-Chief

[1](#)3. (C) Summary: In his first meeting in Tunisia, Deputy
Secretary Zoellick met May 18 with five Tunisian civil

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society leaders to discuss political reform in Tunisia.
Tunisian interlocutors raised concerns about a regression of
civil and political liberties in Tunisia, the GOT's attitude
of governance through security rather than political
measures, and the need for open dialogue and an open
political process to prevent a rise of extremism and to
ensure a smooth political transition. Deputy Secretary
emphasized that significant change was occurring in the
region, and that, while change must come from within, the USG
supports democratic reform. He sought participants'
viewpoints on how best to deliver our reform message to GOT
interlocutors to ensure maximum efficacy. End Summary.

[1](#)4. (C) The Deputy Secretary explained that he was very
interested to hear directly from Tunisian civil society
representatives how they viewed the current political

situation in Tunisia. Trifi opened that the GOT stifled any independent action or thought, highlighting the current crackdown on LTDH activities (Ref C) and the lawyer's sit-in (Ref D). Trifi said that the GOT ignored political dialogue, treated independent action by civil society as a threat, and "viewed everything from a security standpoint," a theme repeated often by all round-table participants. Hajji, discussing the stifling press environment in Tunisia, commented that the state of political and civil liberties "has gotten much worse" in recent years. Khachana negatively compared the present environment to a free press atmosphere that existed under previous Tunisian President Bourguiba. (NOTE: There were significant restrictions on the press under Bourguiba as well.)

15. (C) Marzouk warned that without open political dialogue in Tunisia, it was impossible to ensure orderly succession after Ben Ali, and thus Tunisia's economic and social gains were in jeopardy. Referring to the GOT's fear that independent civil society represented a security threat, all participants emphasized that on the contrary, the lack of free expression and association in Tunisia were leading Tunisians to become extremists. Hajji commented: "Tunisia is becoming a factory for extremists because there is no way to express yourself moderately." AIHR President Baccouche asked the Deputy Secretary if USG security goals and alliances with regional

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regimes contradicted our democratic reform goals. The Deputy Secretary responded that although it might be difficult to

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see, significant change was underway in the political structure of the region. He said that while change must come from within, the USG supports and assists those pushing for democratic reform and human rights.

16. (C) The Deputy Secretary concluded by thanking the participants for their "difficult work which put them at personal risk." Khachana thanked the Deputy Secretary for the round table opportunity, noting that following frequent meetings with Embassy officers, it was beneficial to
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"continue the discussion at a high level." He then asked invitees for their insight on how best to deliver the USG's reform message to GOT interlocutors he would meet during his visit to Tunisia. Hajji commented that while statements from Washington were welcome, "they are not enough." Trifi continued that it was important that the message be consistently delivered at high levels as the GOT "was becoming good at enduring being scolded for 15 minutes and then ignoring" our messages. Shifting focus, Marzouk said that for a significant shift in the political status quo, it was necessary that those "close to the President" (NB: he was likely in part referring to the extended family of Ben Ali) would have to be given assurances that they would "continue to be taken care of" following the departure of Ben Ali. Marzouk admitted that such an arrangement would be a tall order for the USG diplomatically, but that in lieu of such assurances to Ben Ali's inner circle, a more open political system would be difficult.

17. (U) The Deputy Secretary's party has cleared this cable.
HUDSON